How the Arts and Sciences Live at CSR

By Don Luckett

As a classical pianist, Dr. Carl Banner has performed in Carnegie Hall and soloed with the St. Louis Symphony. Unlike his musical peers, he holds a Ph.D. in cellular and developmental biology from Harvard and works as a Scientific Review Administrator for the Center for Scientific Review at the National Institutes of Health, where he has found a unique way to harmonize his careers in science and music.

Carl Banner in front of his wife Marilyn's paintings.

This harmony didn't come easily. "I was a professional musician until I was 26," says Banner. "I wasn't sure whether I had gone into music because my parents and teachers had encouraged me and whether I was really cut out to be a musician." A career counselor told him that he was ideally suited to be a college freshman. Banner took the advice, abandoning his piano and enrolling in Montgomery College in Rockville, Maryland.

An unexpected interest in biology blossomed there, and he soon transferred to the University of Maryland, where he was enthralled by the emerging field of molecular genetics. After graduating with a B.S. in zoology in 1976, he enrolled in Harvard's graduate school. It was an exciting time to be in its genetics lab. "I was right there," says Banner, "interacting with Wally Gilbert's group, which figured out how to sequence DNA." While there, he also did one of the first "promoter-bashing experiments," taking a gene apart base by base and figuring out which one controlled the gene's interaction with RNA polymerase, which catalyzes gene transcription. "It was a very cool and exciting project," he says.

After a couple of years, however, his jilted love of music caught up with him. "I was walking down Divinity Avenue and I heard someone whistling Brahms' A major violin sonata behind me," he explains. The whistler was a biochemist and an excellent violinist. "We began playing together, and we eventually performed weekly at a restaurant on Huron Ave." They played classical and experimental music, performing some of the first music based on DNA codes fresh from the lab. Their performances were very popular, and Banner realized that he was still a musician.

He came to NIH in 1985 to work in the Laboratory of Molecular Biology at the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke. While there, he joined with a group of NIH musicians to form the NIH Chamber Players.

"I thought music was going to be a hobby," he says. "When you are in the lab it is very creative and consuming." However, when he became a program officer at the National Institute on Aging, he got more serious about his music, performing with some of the best amateur musicians in Washington, D.C. By the time he came to the Division of Research Grants (now CSR), he was playing with professional musicians from the National Symphony and elsewhere.

Banner is currently the Scientific Review Administrator for CSR's Synapses, Cytoskeleton, and Trafficking Study Section. "It is a job that has predictable tasks and hours, which enables me to do my music" he says. But it's not just a position that gives him the money and time he needs to do his music. "This is a wonderful job," he adds, "because it is mostly people . . . I'm surrounded by interesting and stimulating colleagues, and I put together peer review panels of the best people in the country. It's also very satisfying to support these men and women as they score the work proposed and help shape the future of biomedical research . . . and it's particularly satisfying to do all I can to keep them free from bias and politics."

Carl Banner plays the piano in "The Cezanne Trio: Adagio espressivo," by Marilyn Banner

The most surprising benefit of the job, however, is how he uses the skills he developed assembling review groups to assemble musicians to perform classical and contemporary chamber music. He's a natural when he calls up in-demand professional musicians and asks, "What's your availability?" "Can you handle these pieces?" "Should I recruit a different violinist?" And convening a review meeting is much like presenting a chamber music concert. He feels the same amount of tension, wanting them to go right.

In 1998, Banner decided he needed his own concert hall, and he scouted the possibilities with his wife, Marilyn, who is a visual artist. They soon rented a warehouse in nearby Kensington, Maryland, and founded Washington Musica Viva, a nonprofit devoted to combining chamber music with the visual and literary arts in intimate spaces. "It is surprisingly successful," he says. "People like being in an art studio . . . it's a living arts experience that's never dull."

The late Dr. Ira Herskowitz, tunes up as Marilyn Banner introduces him for a "Science and the Blues" concert at the Banner Studio.

"I feel very much alive . . . and close to the people there," says Banner. "It's a shared experience . . . and intermissions are sometimes the most exciting part of the programs because people meet each other."

Banner loves it so much, he has founded two other concert series of chamber music: one at the Embassy of the Czech Republic in Washington that features Czech composers, and another at the Ratner Museum in Bethesda.

After 9-11, he says his music changed tremendously. "I want to do soul-nourishing music . . . to go back to the stuff that nourishes and comforts me and makes me feel like life is good. He explains that he's "still struggling with the role of music in turbulent times." Nonetheless, audiences and performers appear to be responding, and he's worried about an over-capacity crowd at his next concert.

Banner thus continues to labor in two worlds—science and the arts—"surrounded by interesting and stimulating colleagues" and driven by the belief he is doing something important.